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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000299

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/27/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: SYRIANS ACCUSE U.S. OF FABRICATING STORY OF NUCLEAR COOPERATION WITH N. KOREA

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1 .4 b and d.

Corrected copy - renumbering of last paragraph.

¶1. (C) Summary: The current Syrian focus in press statements and government-owned publications is on refuting USG public revelations of Syrian-N.Korean nuclear cooperation. We sense a shift from the Syrian focus on the **¶1N.** Korean angle to recognition that U.S. information could be negatively impacting Syrian interests. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) PUBLIC STATEMENTS: Several Syrian official statements have flatly denied USG revelations of SARG-N.Korean nuclear cooperation, the majority of which have appeared in the Arab press.

-- In an April 24 CNN interview and a Washington Post article, the Syrian Ambassador in Washington accused the U.S. of making false claims of Syrian-N.Korean cooperation to justify Israel's September 6 military strikes against Syria.

-- The Syrian Embassy in Washington issued an April 24 statement regretting and denouncing "the campaign of false allegations that the current United States administration continually launches against Syria, claiming the presence of nuclear activity." The statement accused the USG of "misguiding the U.S. Congress" in order to justify Israel's September 6, 2007 bombing raid.

-- An April 25 SANA press release repeated these themes, quoting an unnamed senior official as saying, "This administration as it seemed was a party in carrying out the raid, and it is clear that such a move by the American administration comes in the framework of the negotiations connected with the Korean nuclear file."

-- In an April 26 press statement carried by al Arabiya, Syria's UN Permrep Bashar al-Jafari said his country would fully cooperate with the IAEA in the ongoing investigation of his country's nuclear activities.

-- In an April 26 report by KUNA, Ambassador Moustafa pledged Syria's intent to "deconstruct" the American allegations, contending "We are not in this business now and we do not see Syria acquiring nuclear technology in the foreseeable future." He also added that one purpose of General Hayden's briefings was to undermine members of Congress who favored restoring U.S.-Syrian relations.

-- In an April 27 statement to London Quds Press, Chairman of

the Syrian Assembly International Affairs Committee, Sulayman Haddad said "We suspect the intentions of the United States. It has massed its forces in the region for several months. It wants to achieve its aims in Lebanon through various means and it wants to emerge from its predicament in Iraq." Haddad also suggested that the Syrian-N. Korean revelations were part of a U.S.-Israeli plot to "mislead international public opinion," and he questioned the seriousness of reports of an Israeli announcement that the GOI desired to evacuate the Golan.

3, (SBU) EDITORIALS: The Syrian Government daily "Tishreen" ran an April 26 article rejecting USG revelations of Syrian-N. Korean nuclear cooperation and accusing the U.S. of attempting to undermine Turkish-brokered talks between Israel and Syria.

14. (SBU) Government-owned "Al Thawrah" published two articles on April 27 accusing the U.S. of mounting a campaign of "lies" in a likely replay of the 2003 Iraq scenario. The author calls on the international community to respond in a human and effective manner and prevent this "farce, the price of which the world is paying with its security, stability, and peace." In the second article, the author accuses the U.S. of fabricating lies to hide its "continuous failure in all the alternative plans they have so far devised."

15. (C) TWO LOCAL REACTIONS: The normally well-informed Al Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi (protect) claimed April 27 that he was largely ignorant of the subject. Pressed, he said his personal belief was that the U.S. briefing on Syrian-N. Korean nuclear cooperation was inaccurate. Asked what additional evidence it would take to persuade him that

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the allegations were true, Hamidi replied he was not a military expert; his view was based on his analysis of "how the Syrian government works and how Syrian officials think."

16. (C) Hamidi accused the USG of mounting the campaign to keep the SARG on the defensive and to stigmatize it so that future U.S. administrations could not restore normal bilateral relations. Parroting a line expressed by President Asad, Hamidi said it was all but inconceivable that the SARG would seek to construct a nuclear reactor in cooperation with North Korea, knowing full well its military activities were under constant surveillance by Israel and others. Hamidi did not think the U.S. revelations would weaken Bashar's regime internally or externally, as most Syrians would support the right of Syria to defend itself.

17. (C) Ihsan Sanker (strictly protect), a former MP and prominent businessman, opined that the re-opening of the Syrian nuclear file had come at an bad time for the Syrian regime. President Asad had survived the Arab League summit and was trying to improve Syria's image by traveling in the region. Sanker said his personal view was that Syria was involved in military cooperation with N. Korea. Up until the April 24 briefings, he had been dubious of claims that Syria was constructing a nuclear reactor. But the pictures were hard to deny. Now, Sanker suggested, Syria would face continuing allegations until it took steps to refute them. "Of course Syrian officials are denying" the evidence presented by U.S. officials, he said. "What did you expect?"

Sankar argued that Bashar's internal position would not likely suffer too much damage. Externally, however, Syria would have to explain its position over and over again to Europeans and Arabs. Even if America's credibility had suffered as a result of the 2003 Iraq presentation to the UN Security Council, Syria's credibility would also come into question.

18. (C) Comment: Asad and his circle appear to be struggling to find a coherent public relations strategy. For the time being, the MFA and others are attempting to refute U.S. information directly, though Western media coverage of

Syria's side of the story appears to be notably thin. We are starting to sense a shift in Syria's focus on the North Korean angle to recognition that U.S. information may be negatively impacting Syrian interests.

CORBIN